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# Transcendence: A Defensible and Fruitful Concept for Religious Studies

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## Abstract

Scholars of religion who make use of the concept of transcendence are likely to encounter objections that this concept is too vague, too metaphysical, and too theological for use in Religious Studies. This article develops a differential-phenomenological concept of transcendence that is not susceptible to these charges and that, thanks to its complex logical structure, is potentially fruitful for use in Religious Studies.

## Keywords

transcendence – immanence – meaning – phenomenology – difference

In their 2021 book, *Interpreting and Explaining Transcendence*, editors Jenny Ponzio and Robert A. Yelle (2021: 1) begin by acknowledging that most scholars do not “appear to have much use for the category of Transcendence, which smacks of antiquated, crypto-theological God talk.” Indeed, the concept of transcendence, which once played a major organizing role within the discipline of Religious Studies, has largely fallen out of favor. This might simply reflect the turning of scholarly attention elsewhere, but it is also true that transcendence-talk has been the object of explicit critique for several decades.

We find a prominent such critique in J.Z. Smith’s well-known 1988 essay, “‘Religion’ and ‘Religious Studies’: No Difference at All.” There Smith reflects on, among other things, the differentiation of Religious Studies from other humanistic and social scientific disciplines. In that context, Smith (1988: 238) confesses to being “made uneasy by ... appeals to ‘the apprehension or

experience of transcendence' as a differentiating principle." "[T]he language of transcendence," he continues, is "distressingly vague. A field in quest of an undefined (or, it is held to be undefinable?) *sine qua non* is no field at all." Here, J.Z. Smith registers the objection that the concept of transcendence is vague.

Another example comes from anthropologist Benson Saler's *Conceptualizing Religion*, which includes a detailed engagement with an influential proponent of the language of transcendence, Wilfred Cantwell Smith.<sup>1</sup> Saler (1993: 64) concludes his discussion: "W.C. Smith's vague presentation of 'the transcendent,' and his emphasis on its universal 'impingement' on persons of faith, are very unlikely to appeal to cultural anthropologists." Here again is the complaint that, at least in W.C. Smith's use, transcendence is vague.

We can see in Saler's treatment of W.C. Smith two other objections to transcendence. The first is that the concept of transcendence problematically implies the metaphysical reality of the transcendent. Although Saler judges Smith to be, again, "vague" with regard to the ontological implications of the transcendent's impingement on persons of faith, Saler (1993: 63) concludes that Smith's formulation is in fact metaphysical: "Impingement suggests an impinger." So, Saler finds W.C. Smith's account of transcendence unacceptable for anthropologists not only because it is vague but also because it is too metaphysical in the sense that it suggests the reality of a transcendent someone or something.

The second additional reason Saler finds W.C. Smith's transcendence unacceptable for anthropological use is that the concept is too embedded in Christian assumptions. The idea of a real, transcendent 'impinger' is at home in much of Christian theology, where God can be understood as a transcendent agent or actor. Saler (1993: 63) concludes that W.C. Smith's account of transcendence, contrary to its intentions, fails "to bracket personal theistic and theological commitments."

We see in Saler, then, at least these three objections to W.C. Smith's account of transcendence. Transcendence is 1) vague, 2) metaphysically realist with respect to the transcendent, and 3) metaphysically realist with respect to the transcendent in a specifically theistic direction of a personal, transcendent agent. J.Z. Smith, as we have seen, is willing to sign on for at least the first objection.

This last critique – that transcendence is too theistic or theological – finds extended expression in Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. Fitzgerald argues that the concept of 'religion' is necessarily theological and

1 W.C. Smith wrote that, over the course of his career, transcendence had "become one of my favorite terms" (1990: 33).

therefore unsuited for delineating Religious Studies as a discipline. As part of this broader critique of the theological character of 'religion,' Fitzgerald considers a series of terms that have traditionally been used to bolster the concept of religion or to supply its content. One such term is 'the transcendent':

Another term frequently used for the purposes of defining religion is 'the transcendent.' ... The problem until now has been that the field has been dominated by monotheistic and culturally specific representations deriving from Judaeo-Christian monotheism. Equivalents in other cultures have then been looked for, such as Brahman (the Hindu impersonal absolute) and its personalized manifestations, Buddhist nirvana, African high Gods, and mana, and from this supposed equivalence cryptotheologians have claimed to identify the religions deriving from belief in these metaphysical entities (Fitzgerald 2000: 17–18).

He reiterates later: "Again, this word 'transcendent' has, like the other terms mentioned, been so thoroughly penetrated by western theological and ontological associations that it is likely to import disjunctive meanings into an analysis, either unwittingly or deliberately for ecumenical purposes" (Fitzgerald 2000: 18). In this way, Fitzgerald, too, criticizes previous uses of transcendence as conceptually beholden to theism and theology.

These kinds of critiques of transcendence have been widespread within Religious Studies, helping to shape the intellectual context that forces Pozno and Yelle to begin their book on transcendence with an apology for the very concept. Undeterred, they write:

The gamble taken by this volume is that such skepticism regarding the category of Transcendence is mistaken. It is not only possible but necessary to recuperate this category for a properly anthropocentric study of religion and culture. Indeed, without some category as Transcendence, we declare that it would be impossible to account for the dimensions of human experience, expression, and behavior that are commonly labeled religious. Far from being an antiquated or suspect category, Transcendence is arguably an enduring as well as urgent aspect of culture (Ponzo & Yelle 2021: 1).

My aim in this paper is both less and more ambitious than Yelle and Ponzo's program. On the one hand, my aim is less ambitious in that I am not interested in arguing here for the indispensability of the concept of transcendence. On the other hand, my aim is more ambitious in that I am interested not in a

“gamble” but rather a *demonstration* that “skepticism regarding the category of transcendence is mistaken” (Ponzo & Yelle 2021: 1). Specifically, I aim to outline a concept of transcendence that meets the objections raised above, a concept that is not vague as charged, is not metaphysical, and is not beholden to theological or theistic accounts of transcendence. In so doing, I argue that the concept of transcendence is eminently defensible for use within Religious Studies. Moreover, and based on this, I want to argue that such a concept of transcendence is (if not necessary, at least) fruitful, its utility resting in a complex logical structure that, contrary to the suggestions of critics, lends itself well to analysis in various religious contexts.

## 1 Meaning

I suspect that there are many theoretical approaches to the concept of transcendence that could meet the objections considered above, but the approach I take is a differential phenomenology. Phenomenology, as I understand it here, is that branch of philosophy that concerns how things appear as meaningful. A *differential* phenomenology is one that understands meaning as arising through differentiation. In line with this approach, I provide a general account of meaning in differential-phenomenological terms followed specifically by an account of the meaning of transcendence. The accounts of meaning and transcendence that I provide are, I think, compatible with a variety of thinkers and their respective phenomenological terminologies. But I will rely on the technical vocabulary of the theorist Niklas Luhmann, who himself borrows heavily from that leading figure of twentieth-century phenomenology, Edmund Husserl.<sup>2</sup>

For Luhmann, meaning arises in the context of an operation that he calls an ‘observation’ (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito 2021: 158). An observation is meaningful as an observation *of something*. And an observation of something is only meaningful if it is *for someone or something*; Luhmann calls this someone or something the ‘observer.’<sup>3</sup> From this we have the basic structure of any instance

2 Luhmann’s reliance on Husserl is evident, for example, in Luhmann 1996a. I want to emphasize that while Luhmann’s thinking is wide ranging, I am in this paper focused specifically on his differential-phenomenological vocabulary. Although he was also a theorist of society, religion, law, modernity, media, communication, and many more things besides, I intend in this paper to set those issues aside to focus on the concept of transcendence.

3 It is important to Luhmann’s thinking that, in contrast to Husserl, consciousnesses or subjectivities are only one kind of observer. The chief concern of Luhmann’s thinking is another kind of observer, social systems. He transposes Husserl’s “so highly promising type of theory from the ‘subject’ to the ‘social system theory’” (1996a: 53).

of meaning. Through an observation, something becomes meaningful for an observer.

If an observation is an observation of something, this means that an observation 'indicates' something. To observe X is to indicate it, to point it out. If a tree is going to mean a tree for me, I need to attend to it or select it. Equally important, an observation that indicates X also does *not* indicate any non-X. To meaningfully indicate X, all non-Xs must remain un-indicated. If the tree is to be meaningful to me, I must choose to attend to the tree and not attend to the fence, the rock, and everything else. Given these considerations, every observation both indicates X and, in the same operation, differentiates X from all non-Xs. Or, in an observation, some X is indicated by its differentiation from everything else. So, Luhmann (2012: 69) formally defines an observation as an indication through a distinction. Given that an observation is the foundational operation of meaning, this indication-via-distinction structure is at work in all instances of meaning-making.

Formally, then, an observation is an indication via a distinction. Although an observation is a single operation, we can analyze its several components. First, there is the distinction itself, that which differentiates the indicated from the non-indicated. There is, second, the indication, which establishes which side of the distinction is indicated and which is not. There is, third, the non-indicated side of the distinction. As a shorthand, we can notate an observation as follows: tree/non-tree. The slash signifies the distinction, the left side of the slash is the indicated side, and the right side of the slash is the non-indicated side. Any observation, then, can be analyzed into these three components. Luhmann refers to the whole of this – tree/non-tree – as the *form* of the distinction: the two sides considered together with the differentiation that constitutes them (Andersen 2003: 78). Every observation employs (often implicitly) the form of a distinction.

Given the structure of observation as an indication via a distinction, we can understand observation in terms of actuality and possibility. An observation actualizes a meaning while rendering all other meanings as possible. To observe a tree is to actualize the meaning of the tree while leaving the meaning of the fence and the rock as possible. Of course, had the observation selected to indicate the fence, then the meaning of the fence would have been actually meaningful and the rock and the tree would be possibly meaningful. In any instance of meaning, an actual indication is differentiated from potential indications. For this reason, Luhmann (1996b: 65) defines meaning as the continual actualization of potentialities.

The idea of *continual* actualization introduces a new aspect of meaning-making: time. The foregoing has so far ignored the temporal dimension of meaning-making, treating an observation as a timeless operation. But within

meaning-making systems, such as a consciousness, meaning is not only a single operation but also a process constituted by the succession of observations. That initial observation of the tree is immediately followed by another observation, which is followed by yet another, and so on. That second operation might again indicate the tree, in which case that observation repeats its use of the distinction tree/non-tree. Or, that second operation might indicate the rock, using the distinction rock/non-rock. In that case, the previously actualized meaning of the tree would recede into potential meaning while the potential meaning of the rock would become actualized. In this way, meaning is a temporal process constructed through successive observations. As observations indicate one thing and then another, meaning is processively actualized against a background of potential meaning.

This image of meaning's actualization against a background of potential meaning connects clearly with Husserl's idea of a horizon of meaning. In line with Husserl's phenomenology, Luhmann (1996b: 69) presents the meaning of something as an actualization against a horizon of potential meaning. It follows that the meaning of something is conditioned by a negative relationship (via a distinction) to other, possible meanings. The meaning of any particular thing, then, is not reducible to itself but is embedded in a network of potential meaning.<sup>4</sup>

If observation works as described here, every observation is necessarily accompanied by that which is unobservable. Although there are others, the most straightforward case of unobservability is the non-indicated side of a distinction. If an observation indicates a tree, the fence and the rock differentiated from the tree are, in that observation, unobservable. Of course, a follow-up observation might indicate the fence, but in *that* observation the tree and the rock would be unobservable. In fact, everything else (every non-fence) would be unobservable. In other words, in any instance of meaning-making, all non-indicated or possible meanings are unobservable. Yet, paradoxically, the unobservable is, in Derrida's (1973: 142–43) terms, present by its absence, present by its negative relationship to the indicated, and present as a possible meaning that can be actualized at another moment.<sup>5</sup>

4 When things are put this way, there are clear overlaps between a Luhmannian account of meaning developed here and the perhaps better known accounts offered in structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics. There, a word means what it means by virtue of its differentiation from other words, and a sentence is a stringing together of words. See ch. 2 of Currie 2004. For Luhmann (1990: 23–24), an observation is meaningful by virtue of a distinction, and a system of meaning arises through the stringing together of observations.

5 In Luhmann's (2013a: 18) terms, the distinction generates the observable and unobservable. In Derrida's terms, *différance* is the play of presence and absence. He states, for example:

The previous paragraph is an observation about the phenomenon of meaning, one that uses the distinction observable/unobservable. Specifically, the previous paragraph is a second-order observation, one that takes the observations which use the distinctions tree/non-tree and fence/non-fence, observing those through the distinction observable/unobservable. On the one hand, there is nothing logically necessary about such a second-order observation; an observation of a tree could lead to an observation of a fence and so on without an observer ever observing that process through the distinction observable/unobservable. On the other hand, such a second-order observation via the form observable/unobservable is always available. For any observation whatsoever, it is always possible to consider what remains hidden from observation. Such a possibility always accompanies any meaning-making whatsoever.

## 2 The Meaning of Transcendence

The above account of meaning in general provides enough background to consider the meaning of the concept of transcendence. The word transcendence derives from the Latin verb *transcendere*, which means to step over, to move beyond, or to surpass. From this we can see that the meaning of 'to transcend' depends on drawing a distinction between one place, state, or time and another. To transcend is to cross the boundary from here to there, from one state to another, or from now to then. Transcendence, then, labels the place, state, or time that is beyond (Dalferth 2018: 91).

Given that the meaning of transcendence depends on its being on the far side of a distinction, its meaning logically depends on the near side of that distinction, which we usually call immanence. The concept of transcendence is meaningful only if immanence is at least assumed: to talk about something as transcendent implies that something else is immanent. Vice versa, talk of immanence is meaningful only if transcendence is assumed. To claim something is immanent is to create meaning about it that depends on an implicit contrast with transcendence. (We could talk about a tree without invoking transcendence. But to talk about a tree *as immanent* depends on an implicit contrast with transcendence.) So, transcendence and immanence are a conceptual

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"Differance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be 'present,' appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element..." (Derrida 1973: 142).

pair. They depend on each other for their meaning, and they imply each other when invoked.

Not all concepts are so dependent on a companion term. It is true from the account of meaning in general that any meaningful concept depends on a distinction of some kind, but not all distinctions generate such co-dependent partners. The concept of tree, for example, is meaningful within a whole series of oppositions. We might think about the tree in opposition to the rock or the fence, but also in opposition to a bush or a sidewalk. Immanence and transcendence make their meaning together, in contrast, like the conceptual pair left/right. The logical negation of the one generates the other. Transcendence and immanence are, as Luhmann (2013b: 91) says, a binary form. We can notate this form: immanence/transcendence.<sup>6</sup>

Immanence/transcendence is not only a binary form; it is also a universal form. By this I don't mean that the form is culturally universal, as if it were used by all people everywhere. I mean, rather, that the form is universally applicable, that anything whatsoever can be processed meaningfully by observing it through this form. Anything in the world of meaning – the tree, the fence, the rock, a sandwich – can be interpreted meaningfully in terms of immanence/transcendence. Again, not every conceptual difference allows for universal meaning processing. For example, there is only so much of the world of meaning that can be interpreted through the difference tree/non-tree. But binary, universal forms such as immanence/transcendence offer virtually unlimited opportunities for meaning production and information processing.<sup>7</sup>

As perhaps has become clear, immanence/transcendence is (like observable/unobservable) a second-order concept. The component terms do not work well to label things as things; we don't say, 'Over here is a tree, and over there is a transcendence.' Immanence/transcendence is used not in such a phenomenologically basic way so as to make things manifest but rather in a hermeneutical way to interpret already conceptualized things: 'This tree (already meaningful as a tree) is immanent.' Immanence/transcendence works hermeneutically, that is, by interpreting some already meaningful thing in terms of immanence and transcendence (Dalferth 2018: 87–89).<sup>8</sup>

6 In other words, from the perspective of a differential phenomenology, the concept of transcendence should be understood as a difference, that is, as the difference between immanence and transcendence.

7 We might think about another binary and universal form, 0/1 as employed in computer programming, with its virtually unlimited capacity for information processing.

8 Although I don't pursue the argument here, the preceding paragraphs regarding the differential, second-order structure of 'transcendence' provide the foundation for demonstrating that 'transcendence' can be used in ways that avoid essentialism.



The form immanence/transcendence is inherently paradoxical, as we can see by attending to the idea of transcending. Transcending is the movement from immanence to transcendence, from here to there, from one state to another. But, paradoxically, as soon as we move from 'here' to 'there,' 'there' becomes 'here,' and a new 'there' is established. In transcending, transcendence becomes immanence, and transcendence thus always remains beyond reach. But, again, so long as it is decided to observe this process through the distinction between immanence and transcendence, we can't simply be rid of transcendence either. It is always present by its absence in any understanding of the world as immanent. Transcendence accompanies but exceeds immanence just as the unobservable accompanies but exceeds every observation.<sup>9</sup>

Immanence/transcendence is paradoxical not only because of this paradox of transcending. Another paradox comes into view if we step back and ask about the location of the observer who observes through immanence/transcendence. Manifestly, the observer does not have a God's-eye view. Therefore, the observer observes from an immanent perspective. If the observer distinguishes between 'here' and 'there,' the observer draws that distinction while standing 'here.' If the observer distinguishes between 'now' and 'then,' the observer draws that distinction in the 'now.' In this way, observing via the immanence/transcendence distinction locates the observer on the side of immanence. Paradoxically, even if the observer speaks of transcendence, the observer does so from immanence. Call this the paradox of immanent observation.

The location of the observer within immanence reveals that we can distinguish between two different kinds of transcendence. There is, on the one hand, the transcendence that is implied but always out of reach as the immanent observer observes the world in terms of immanence/transcendence. This is the transcendence that skips along the horizon of every instance of immanence, as when the rock transcends an observation of the tree. But if we observe, as in the previous paragraph, that all of this – immanence (tree), transcendence (rock), the distinction between them, and the observer that distinguishes – takes place in immanence, *that* observation implicitly invokes a transcendence that transcends all of this. So, there are two kinds of transcendence at work. The first is the transcendence that transcends any observation of something as immanent. Call this relative transcendence. The second is the transcendence that transcends the entire immanent scenario of observation. Call this absolute transcendence.<sup>10</sup>

9 Luhmann himself connects observable/unobservable to immanence/transcendence (2013a: 36, 53).

10 Dalferth, too, distinguishes between relative and absolute transcendence (2012b: 155–57). We can put the idea of two kinds of transcendence into the language of horizon: An

In order to confirm that these really are two different kinds of transcendence, we can note the difference between the distinctions that constitute each kind. The distinction between immanence and relative transcendence is, in Kant's (2004: 103–104) terms, a boundary that in principle can be crossed. In a given observation of the tree, the rock remains transcendent. But in this instance, the difference between immanence/transcendence is merely a boundary. A follow-up observation can indicate the rock, thus bringing the previously transcendent rock into immanence. So, the transcendence of the rock can in principle be overcome. In contrast, the distinction between immanence and absolute transcendence is, in Kant's (2004: 103–104) terms, not a boundary but a limit that cannot be crossed. No observation from the perspective of immanence can make absolute transcendence immanent. Once we discover the immanent location of the observer, then, we can recognize a difference between relative and absolute transcendence.<sup>11</sup>

This discovery of two kinds of transcendence reveals that immanence/transcendence has a complex structure, one that Luhmann calls a re-entry.<sup>12</sup> In this structure, the distinction between immanence and transcendence is entered into itself and doubled. This can be notated like this: Immanence(immanence/transcendence)/Transcendence. On the one hand, there is within the parentheses a distinction between (lowercase) immanence and transcendence. This corresponds to tree/rock in the observation of a tree, where the transcendence of the rock is relative. On the other hand, the tree, the rock, the distinction between them, and the observer who draws it all belong within (capital) Immanence, on the indicated side of the distinction between Immanence and absolute (capital) Transcendence.

This entire complex structure – call it I(i/t)/T – is potentially in play as soon as an observer begins making meaning with either ‘immanence’ or ‘transcendence.’ The entire structure ought to be seen as a logical whole. The reasoning for this is as follows. While the difference between a boundary and a limit shows that we are dealing with two kinds of transcendence, it is nonetheless true that the whole structure is implied when any of its terms are invoked. We know already that the use of either (lowercase) immanence or transcendence brings

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observation cuts an object out of a horizon. Relatively transcendent are those potential objects that remain ‘in’ the horizon. They are in principle available to a different observation. But the horizon itself is absolutely transcendent. No observation (which by definition ‘cuts’ the horizon of meaning) can observe the horizon itself.

11 On the theme of boundary and limit with respect to transcendence, see Dalferth 2012b: 158–59.

12 On the theme of re-entry in general, see Luhmann 1993. For the idea of re-entry in religion, Luhmann 2013a: 57–61.

the other into play, since each depends on the other for meaning. Now we can add that the use of either of these lowercase terms also brings Immanence and Transcendence into play, since we can recognize that immanence/transcendence takes place within Immanence, and that Immanence depends on Transcendence for its meaning (Dalferth 2012b: 155–57). For these reasons, I take ‘the concept of transcendence’ to mean this entire complex, re-entered form: I(i/t)/T.<sup>13</sup>

All of this is necessarily abstract. A slightly more concrete account might help illustrate this form or concept. We can take Death as an example of something absolutely Transcendent. Biological Death is the limit of conscious meaning; meaning can be made only in the Immanence of Life, and Death absolutely limits Life. We see here that Death relates to Life as Transcendence to Immanence. As with anything treated as Transcendent, then, Death is undifferentiated and, strictly speaking, meaningless. Death can nonetheless become a topic of meaning so long as it becomes part of a form, one side of the distinction life/death. Note that thematizing Death as a topic of meaning involves replicating the re-entered structure of I(i/t)T, now with life/death: L(l/d)/D. This notation symbolizes how biological Death, the incomprehensible end of meaning, can be treated as meaningful via a contrast with life. Of course, the making of meaning via the life/death difference occurs in Life. In this way, ‘death’ as a topic of discussion replicates the form of the concept of transcendence, offering itself as a rich locus for working through its paradoxical logic.

How does the concept of transcendence as developed here stack up against the objections raised earlier? If we take this re-entered form, I(i/t)/T, as the concept of transcendence, I think it is fair to say that the concept is not vague, if vagueness is taken to mean imprecise, inexact, or inexplicit. Instead, this is an explicated account of the meaning of ‘transcendence’ against the background of an explicated account of meaning in general. I take it that the paradoxes that attend the concept of transcendence do not count against the precision of the concept, since reasons can be offered for why the paradoxes appear as they do. It seems to me this is a reasonably precise, exact, and explicit account of ‘transcendence’ such that the concept cannot be charged with vagueness.

Second, the concept of transcendence as outlined is not metaphysical. I mean by this that the concept itself makes no claims about the status or reality

13 From here forward, then, I will use ‘the concept of transcendence’ to mean ‘I(i/t)T,’ ‘immanence’ to name the lowercase i, ‘transcendence’ to name the lowercase t or ‘relative transcendence,’ ‘Transcendence’ to name the capital T or ‘absolute Transcendence,’ and ‘Immanence’ to name the scenario in which the distinction i/t necessarily operates. When using the terms ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ in a general way that doesn’t refer to this formal concept, I set them off in single quotation marks.

of a Transcendent metaphysical realm. The concept does not in itself make ontological claims about the reality of any Transcendent being or beings. Indeed, the concept of transcendence itself is agnostic about such issues; it can be used to posit the reality of Transcendence, but it can also be used to deny Transcendence as an illusion that arises from everyday meaning-processing. As I elaborate in the next section, the concept of transcendence *can be* cashed out metaphysically, but it need not be.

Third, the concept of transcendence as outlined is not theological or theistic. The concept has been derived philosophically – through a differential-phenomenological account of meaning – and not theologically. Nor is there anything about the concept that privileges theistic conceptions of Transcendence characteristic of, say, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Again, as I argue in the next section, theists have employed the logic of I(i/t)/T within their theologies in particular ways. But these uses should be considered particular theological specifications of a general philosophical concept available through the differential-phenomenological analysis of meaning.

### 3 The Concept of Transcendence, Vague and Specified

Having just argued that the concept of transcendence is not vague, I want now to argue that it is. But in doing so, I intend a different meaning of ‘vagueness.’ In the critiques of ‘transcendence,’ ‘vague’ means unclear, implicit, or imprecise. I agree with the critics: if ‘transcendence’ is vague in this sense, it is not of much use in the study of religion. Fortunately, the concept of transcendence is not vague in this sense. But there is another way in which the concept *is* vague, and this kind of vagueness makes the concept exceedingly well-suited for the study of religion.

The meaning of vagueness I have in mind has been articulated by Robert C. Neville with reliance on Charles Peirce. According to this line of thinking, a concept is vague if it is “internally complex with two or more levels of determinateness. On the one hand, categories are determinate with respect to other categories on the same level ... On the other hand, a category can be partially indeterminate or vague with respect to what might fall under it, or specify it, or instantiate it (all equivalent expressions)” (Neville & Wildman 2001: 196). Take for example the concept of ‘government.’ This is a vague concept in the sense that it can be specified in a variety of ways. ‘Government’ could mean ‘democracy’; alternatively, it could mean ‘autocracy.’ Both ‘democracy’ and ‘autocracy’ instantiate or specify what ‘government’ means vaguely. Here, the concept of ‘government’ is operating at two levels, the vague or relatively indeterminate

level ('government'), which gathers under it at another level various specified or relatively determinate instantiations of it (such as 'democracy' and 'autocracy'), some of which may be, as in this example, logically incompatible with each other.<sup>14</sup> The concept of transcendence – as I(i/t)/T – is vague in precisely this sense: it is specifiable in a variety of potentially incompatible ways.

As this example also shows, a concept that is vague in this sense operates as a category. Such a categorial concept "can be parsed so as to distinguish a variety of meanings of the concept, each individually consistent, yet collectively mutually inconsistent" (Wildman 2016: 126). The vague-but-specifiable character of the concept of transcendence allows it to operate as a category, which makes it fruitful for comparative use.

I consider here two ways in which the vagueness of the concept of transcendence can be specified. First, it can be specified with respect to the kind of discourse, be it metaphysical, cosmological, epistemological, ethical, etc. Second, it can be specified through different religious or spiritual vocabularies.

### 3.1 *Kinds of Discourse*

First, we can see one range of ways that the concept of transcendence can be specified if we attend to the kinds of discourse in which it might play a role. For example, the concept of transcendence can be specified through metaphysical discourse, in which case it could unpack the meaning of the Being (or non-being) that grounds all beings. Or the concept of transcendence could be specified in cosmological discourse, in which case Transcendence names that which is beyond space and time, conditioning everything in space and time. Or it could be specified epistemologically, perhaps as the incomprehensible ground of all comprehensible things. Or it could be specified ethically, in terms of the 'other.' Each of these kinds of discourse, and many more besides, provides options for specifying the vague concept of transcendence (Dalferth 2012a: 141).

Let's take as an example Plato's famous allegory of the cave, in which the philosopher escapes the cave to discover the sun, learning that the objects before the cave-dwellers are mere shadows of the true world. 'Transcendence' in this story is, in the first instance, spatial, drawn by the distinction between the space of the cave and the space beyond. Metaphorically considered, the story can be interpreted in metaphysical terms, as an account of the true reality beyond the cave that conditions the apparent reality within the cave (Dalferth 2012b: 147–48). Through reflection on this allegory, one could develop, as Plato and

14 This example comes from De Nys, who adopts Neville's usage of 'vagueness' (De Nys 2009: 75–76).

some of his followers did, an elaborated metaphysical theory of Immanence/Transcendence as Appearance/Reality. To do so is to develop a specific, metaphysical account of the vague concept of transcendence.

Another option, potentially compatible with the first, is to specify the concept of transcendence in epistemological terms. One way to approach this project is by locating epistemological Transcendence in objective reality. Here, any knowledge of the world could be understood as a necessarily partial view of a complex world that itself escapes full knowledge. Whatever is known (immanence) depends on a world (Transcendence) which can never be known in totality. Another way to approach this project is to locate epistemological transcendence in the subjective conditions of knowledge. Any instance of knowledge (immanence) presupposes a knowing self or subject (Transcendence), which itself is not available for comprehensive knowledge. In this way, the concept of transcendence can be specified in largely epistemological terms, both objectively and subjectively (Dalferth 2012b: 150–51).

It is perhaps worth emphasizing again that neither of these examples of a metaphysical or an epistemological interpretation of the concept of transcendence is necessarily theological, although each can be and has been taken up theologically. As has been well documented, Christian theology, for example, has frequently taken up the Platonic metaphysical specification of Immanence/Transcendence as Appearance/Reality, marrying it with varying degrees of success to the biblical conceptuality of Creation/Creator. The vague concept of transcendence need not but can be interpreted metaphysically, and, if it is, that metaphysical interpretation need not but can be specified theologically (Dalferth 2012b: 148–49).

Examples of various kinds of discourse of ‘transcendence’ could be multiplied. The point is that the concept of transcendence is vague and, as such, capable of various specifications. It can be specified metaphysically (and in various ways), epistemologically (in various ways), and so on. The concept of transcendence, as a category, provides the logical tools to consider these various discourses in relationship to each other.

### 3.2 *Religious Vocabularies*

A second way that the vague concept of transcendence can be specified is through the vocabularies of the various traditions we consider religious or spiritual. Without here going so far as to define religion in terms of ‘transcendence,’ it seems to be the case that the more directly absolute Transcendence comes into explicit consideration, the more likely we are to see patterns of thought and practice usually associated with religions. Here, religious vocabulary can come into play. That is, the meaning of the complex re-entered form

of transcendence can be processed through the vocabularies of Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism, etc. In saying that the vague concept of transcendence can be specified through religious vocabulary, I do not mean to suggest that a particular pattern of interpreting the concept of transcendence corresponds to a particular named religious tradition. The reality is much more complex because a particular religion might include a variety of diverse strands of thinking and practice with respect to transcendence. Judaism, to take an example, might sometimes identify absolute Transcendence with a personal God while also sometimes taking such personal language as a symbolic expression of an ultimately impersonal Transcendent. A shared religious vocabulary, then, can hide a diversity of perspectives on issues associated with 'transcendence.' But the chief point here is that religious vocabularies do facilitate various specifications of the vague concept of transcendence.

Source material that is traditionally considered religious, then, often lends itself to interpretation in terms of 'transcendence.' Indeed, this has led many scholars to define religion in terms of 'transcendence.' Bruce Lincoln (2005: 8) writes, for example, "Religion, I submit, is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal." Lincoln's formulation not only defines religion in terms of 'transcendence,' it also nicely suggests the paradox of Immanent observation that attends religion so defined, for how can one speak (always in Immanence) with Transcendent authority about Transcendent things? If religious discourse is defined in terms of I(i/t)/T, it seems that a feature of that discourse must be the handling of this paradox. To put it crudely, religion must solve this problem. The solution cannot come, however, through a logical dissolution of the paradox, which is impossible. Instead, it comes through the elaboration of a complex structure of meaning such that any questions regarding the paradox can be referred to further religious meaning-structures. Religion solves this paradox of Immanent observation when for every religious question about the paradox there is a religious answer. With enough such recursive complexity, paradox can become a reason to engage more deeply in religious meaning rather than a reason to turn away from it.

One strategy for dealing with topics of 'transcendence' is through symbolism.<sup>15</sup> A symbol brings two things together, and, according to the logic developed

15 "Forms of meaning are experienced as religious if their meaning refers back to the unity of the difference between observable and unobservable, if *for that* a form is found" (Luhmann 2013a: 21). A symbol is an example of such a form. Also, "Religious symbols are those whose primary reference, direct or indirect, is to a finite/infinite contrast, that

here, a religious symbol brings together immanence and Transcendence. It bridges these two by itself being an immanent object that is taken to say something about Transcendence. The burning bush is something immanent, but Moses takes it to mean something about the Transcendent Yahweh (Neville 1996: 41–42). In this way, a religious symbol brings together immanence and Transcendence so that something can be said about Transcendence. Such a symbolic strategy for handling the problem of Immanent observation only succeeds when any individual symbol is networked with a series of others in a complex meaning structure. Only then can the paradox be referred to a series of follow-up observations, with the effect that the network of meanings lends plausibility to any one symbol.

To illustrate how symbols and meaning networks solve the problem of Immanent observation by providing opportunities for meaningful talk of Transcendence, I take as an example the Christian rite of the eucharist.<sup>16</sup> At a first level of symbolism, the bread and wine of the eucharist symbolize the body and blood of Christ. On the one hand, because they symbolize Christ's broken body and spilled blood in his crucifixion, they symbolize his pain and suffering. On the other hand, bread and wine are symbols of nourishment and joy, pointing to the new life of Christ's resurrection. In this way, the bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ, pointing to his crucifixion and resurrection.

Christ's crucifixion and resurrection in turn provide resources for dealing with the meaning of Death.<sup>17</sup> Christ's story re-narrates the relationship of Life and Death, treating Death not as the void that negates Life but rather as the fulfillment of Life, as new Life. Because it is affirmed in the eucharist that Christ's believers participate in this reconfiguration of Life and Death, the rite provides worshippers with a normative framework for Life. They are to treat Life, including its suffering, as the Immanent side of a contrast with the new Life they will share with the risen Christ. In this way, the symbols of the eucharistic bread

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is, at least partly to the divine or the infinite" (Neville 1996: 65). Neville's 'finite/infinite contrast' corresponds with the 'immanence/transcendence distinction' (1996: 58).

16 I rely on Robert Neville's symbolic analysis of the supper rite, which, by his own admission, only begins to scratch the surface of the symbolic meaning of the eucharist (Neville 1996: 78, 104). My summary presentation here, in turn, only scratches the surface of Neville's surface-scratching.

17 Death, as something absolutely Transcendent to meaning, provides rich opportunities for religious meaning-making. "[T]he meaning of death is a problem where religion has to prove itself" (Luhmann 2013a: 32). "The meaning of life and death as human existential conditions is a central borderline finite/infinite contrast addressed in the symbolologies of nearly every religion, not always with the same outcome" (Neville 1996: 105).



and wine provide resources for making sense of Life and Death, Immanence and Transcendence.

Again, the bread and wine function as symbols for making sense of Transcendence in large part because they are part of a meaning-network that absorbs and diffuses the paradox of Immanent observation. If the worshipper wonders why the life and death of Christ should be treated as normative, the eucharistic rite's words of institution refer that question to Christ's status as the incarnate Word of God. That is, Christ himself is a personified symbol of Immanence/Transcendence (in Christian discourse: Creation/Creator). Questions about Christ's status, in turn, can be referred to further theological and liturgical sites. In this way, the resources of the Christian tradition can function as a complex network that makes sense of Transcendence in the only way possible – through symbolic complexity rather than logical dissolution.

In order explicitly to deal with the suspicion that the concept of transcendence is compatible only with theistic contexts, let me also relay an analysis from a Buddhist context.<sup>18</sup> According to the Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra, for example, Buddhist practice is a means to attain liberation (*mokṣa*) from *Saṃsāra*, the perpetual karmic cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Liberation from *Samsara* leads to *Nirvāṇa*. Buddhist practice thus presupposes a distinction between *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*, where *Saṃsāra* is conditioned, determinate, and observable (*saṃskṛta*), while *Nirvana* is unconditioned, indeterminate, and unobservable (*asaṃskṛta*). As such, *Nirvāṇa* is spoken of primarily in negative terms. It is neither being nor non-being, and in it there is no death, no coming to existence, no cessation, etc. From this we can see that the distinction *Saṃsāra/Nirvāṇa* specifies the distinction Immanence/Transcendence.

This teaching is credited to the Buddha, who liberated himself from *Saṃsāra* to attain *Nirvāṇa*. The Buddha offered teachings and practices to those yet to be liberated, those in *Saṃsāra*, so they might attain *Nirvāṇa*. So, Buddhist doctrine involves the re-entry of *saṃsāra/nirvāṇa* on the side of *Saṃsāra*. The Buddha personifies the unity of the distinction as the one who has attained *Nirvāṇa*, speaking of it within *Saṃsāra*. The figure of the Buddha (or the status he has achieved, *tathāgata*) specifies in terms of *Saṃsāra/Nirvāṇa* the complex, re-entered form of the concept of transcendence (Lehnert 2021: 169–74).

The Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism concludes from the unity of *Saṃsāra/Nirvāṇa* in the Buddha that there is no difference between *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* at all. The result is a doctrine of two truths (*satya-dvaya*). The relative truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) teaches that, considered from the perspective of

18 I rely here on Lehnert 2021. The specific context of his analysis is the Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra. See also Kleine 2016.

*Śaṃsāra*, there is a distinction between *Śaṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*. The absolute Truth (*paramārtha-satya*) teaches that, considered from the perspective of *Nirvāṇa*, there is no difference between *Śaṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*. The doctrine of the two truths thus performs a double re-entry of *śaṃsāra/nirvāṇa* on each side of the distinction [S(s/n)/N(s/n)], with the distinction affirmed on the side of *Śaṃsāra* and overcome on the side of *Nirvāṇa*. This allows for descriptions of the distinction *śaṃsāra/nirvāṇa* from either side of the distinction (Lehnert 2021: 174–76).

As with the Christian meaning-structure surrounding the eucharist, this Buddhist logic facilitates saying a great deal about that which cannot be said, namely Transcendence, here as *Nirvāṇa*. Buddhist doctrine and practice handle the paradox of Immanent observation by diffusing it along a complex and recursively structured network of meaning. Again, like the Christian example, the Buddhist structure speaks of Transcendence from Immanence in a way that offers to devotees resources for organizing their thoughts and patterns of life within Immanence. Comparisons of the Buddhist example with the Christian example (and of the Buddhist example with other Buddhist examples) are possible by means of a sufficiently developed concept of transcendence.

#### 4 Observing via the Concept of Transcendence

Debates about the suitability of concepts for the study of religion have taken place, in part, under the terms of the insider versus outsider debate.<sup>19</sup> On the extreme insider side of the debate, often associated with W.C. Smith,<sup>20</sup> the argument would be that the academic study of religion ought to respect and even use the concepts favored by insiders of a particular religious tradition. On the extreme outsider side of the debate, the argument would be that the academic study of religion should self-consciously distance itself from concepts used by religious insiders. The objection considered above – that ‘transcendence’ is unsuitable for Religious Studies because it is theologically inflected – participates in this debate. This objection sees ‘transcendence’ as proper to the insider discourses of certain theistic religions and therefore unsuitable for use within Religious Studies unless sufficiently modified. I conclude this article by relating its argument to this insider versus outsider debate, suggesting how religious uses of the concept of transcendence might differ from academic

19 For an overview of this issue, see McCutcheon 1999.

20 W.C. Smith was, as mentioned above, a proponent of the language of transcendence. He was also a proponent of a strong insider perspective (1981: 97).

uses. What separates religion and scholarship with respect to ‘transcendence,’ I suggest, is not so much the use of different concepts as the use of the same concept in different ways.<sup>21</sup> Given the theory of meaning sketched above, these differences can be understood as different ways of observing the world through the complex, re-entered form of the concept of transcendence.

The above analysis suggests that observing the world religiously through the concept of transcendence involves using the difference between Immanence/Transcendence to provide a second-order interpretation of the world. As discussed above, the Immanence/Transcendence distinction is not phenomenologically basic – making an object meaningful qua object – but hermeneutical – interpreting an already meaningful object in terms of Immanence/Transcendence. The bread of the eucharist, already meaningful as bread, is further interpreted as an immanent symbol of Transcendence. In this way, religious use of the concept of transcendence is not a basic meaning-making operation but rather a secondary one to which periodic recourse might be taken.

A function of such recourse to religious observation via the concept of transcendence, it seems, is to secure orientation in the world of meaning. Because the world of meaning is infinitely complex and profoundly contingent, orienting concepts are necessary for the reduction of complexity and the guidance of action. One of many ways to secure orientation is to interpret the world through the concept of transcendence. Actions and structures that are immanent can be interpreted as advantageous or disadvantageous in relationship to a particular understanding of Transcendence. In this way, meaning-complexes related to Transcendence provide orientation for patterns of thinking, acting, and being within Immanence.

We would expect such religious use of the concept of transcendence to favor particular, specified patterns. That is, the concept of transcendence provides the most guidance for thought and action if it is used in a specified way. Little is gained hermeneutically if it is merely recognized that the complex world can be interpreted in terms of Transcendence, and that it can be interpreted in an overwhelming variety of often conflicting ways. We would expect in the religious use of the concept of transcendence, then, a relatively lower frequency of vague language such as ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence,’ a relatively higher frequency of specified language such as, for example, ‘*saṃsāra*’ and ‘God’s will.’

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21 When challenged to clarify his concept of transcendence, W.C. Smith does little to distinguish his scholarly use of the term from religious use (1990: 34). Without much distance between religious and academic uses, his concept of transcendence lacks the analytical leverage I try to give it here.

Scholarly use of the concept of transcendence can be contrasted to the religious use in each of these three instances. First, scholarly use of the concept of transcendence would take shape not in a second but rather a third order of observation. If there is at the first order of observation the basic phenomenological meaning of bread, and there is a second-order religious interpretation of the bread through specifications of the concept of transcendence, then the scholar – here in a third-order move – interprets that second-order religious meaning-making. Second, the scholar's primary goal tends not to be orientation in life but rather the production of knowledge according to disciplinary understandings of truth and method. Third, we would further expect that, in contrast to religious use of the concept of transcendence, scholarly use of the concept would attend to its re-entered form in all its paradoxical complexity, with conscious attention to both its vague and specified applications. That is, scholarly consideration would recognize the variety of shapes that observing via the concept of transcendence might take and would see any specific, determinate use of that concept as one actualization of many possibilities.

The concept of transcendence, it seems, can be defended against previous charges that 'transcendence' is unsuitable for use in Religious Studies. The concept need not be vague in the sense of being inexplicit or unclear. The concept need not derive from theistic or metaphysical contexts. Rather, it can be derived philosophically, as through a differential-phenomenological analysis. Nor does such a philosophically derived concept necessarily bring with it theistic or metaphysical implications. Furthermore, the concept of transcendence is not only defensible but potentially fruitful. This is because the concept is vague in another sense, being capable of specification in a variety of directions. As such, the concept of transcendence is available for use as a category, as a concept that brings a number of potentially mutually contradictory instances under it so as to facilitate comparison.

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